

17th Sunday after Trinity 2024

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Preacher: Rev. Daniel Avitan

[0 : 01] Before we get into our text today, the text that Matt read, I don't think he wrote it, I think he read it. Let's pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for your word, written by human hands, inspired by your Holy Spirit.

And Lord, because it is inspired, because it's not just a wonderful story or a classic tale or a myth of old, but it is your very word, help us to submit to it, to live by it, to be formed by it.

And Lord, we want to be people that seek after your truth. So Lord, we pray that only truth will last after this sermon, and that you would bless us.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Bit of a news flash. Clairvoyants are making a comeback. I don't know if you guys knew this.

I mean, at least they are from Disney's point of view. The past two or three weeks, I've been going on, whether it's YouTube, whether I check the score app to check out baseball scores, or see if there's any news in the NBA.

[1 : 13] I mean, wherever it is, on the side of buses, Disney is pushing their new spin-off of a spin-off called Agatha All Along. And if you haven't heard of it, it is about a witch.

And she is a bit of an anti-hero. It's about revenge. And it is not subtle in any way. It is about witchcraft. Wicca, the occult, you name it.

And if anything, a show like this only confirms the popularity of witchcraft reflected in society. I mean, Disney and other corporations, they want to pick winners.

They want to hit home runs. They want to make money. And if they know they can make something that's going to appeal to the cultural moment of the day, whatever is exciting, whatever is popular, they'll do that.

And really interesting. When I say clairvoyants are making a comeback, it's a bit of a gripping statement. But I really do mean it. I found an article from 2022, October 31st, of course, 2022, so 23 months ago, that detailed this new trend on TikTok.

[2 : 31] If you are not like 25 or under, TikTok is new social media. But hashtag witchtalk is a whole subsection of TikTok that is dedicated to incantations, spells, witchcraft, Wicca, wizardry, you name it.

And back in 2022, at the time of the writing of that article that I read, there was something like over 30 billion specific views on hashtag witchtalk.

I have no idea what it is to say. I wasn't going to spend an hour going down the rabbit hole of looking for current stats for witchtalk. I'm sure it's more than 30 billion now.

What's interesting is, you know, on one hand, it seems like there's just a bunch of people trying to do some cosplay stuff. But it would appear that it is appealing to this growing desire to be connected to something more than the material world that we have.

This now cottage industry of online influencers that push the occult are making coin from people, learning how to do tarot card readings, learning incantations, learning blessings and curses.

[4 : 02] People are making thousands of dollars for private lessons. Whether or not they're professionals, I don't know where you can get your credentials to be a witch.

But nevertheless, clairvoyance seem to be back. So we're going to continue in Acts. That's a bit of an interesting way to open up a sermon.

But we continue in Acts and we're going to read about an interaction with this first missionary journey. Paul, at the time Saul, he's going to have a name change here and he'll continue to go by Paul for the rest of Acts.

So Saul, Paul, Barnabas and then John Mark will be the first commissioned missionaries. And within the first story, they're going to have this interaction with a false prophet that's described as a

magician.

Not described as like a court jester or somebody who does some fun party tricks, but as somebody who has real political and cultural power in the city.

[5 : 03] In fact, he's an advisor to Sergius Paulus. He is the pro-council, the highest ranking official, Roman official in the island of Cyprus.

Or is it Crete, Cyprus? Wherever they are. So as we read, I want to caution us to be not quick to dismiss this story as mythical and fictional.

Why? For, I guess, a couple of reasons. The first one is that Luke, who wrote this account, isn't writing a myth. He is not writing a story, but theological history. And Luke isn't a writer by profession.

He's a doctor. He is about facts and he is looking to write a near forensic account, a near forensic theological account of the birth and growth of the church.

If you remember last week in Acts chapter 12, he details the demise of Herod Agrippa. And this description, I mean, different in minor details, but it is corroborated by non-Christian historians.

[6 : 12] Luke is writing history. The second thing is we have a tendency here in the West to have chronological and intellectual snobbery towards things that happened in yester century and to people that live primarily in the global South.

We would see them as backwards. We are rationalistic people. But this idea of rationalistic, material, enlightenment thinking is very new.

And it fails to see this whole picture of God's creation. How God created the world. That there is a spiritual world. So, as a bit of an introduction, and because we are committed in this church to preach through full books of the Bible, we are going to walk towards a story about a magician this morning.

We are going to see what the Lord would speak to us through it, how it is going to shape our lives, and really how we are going to see that the gospel in this story, that the gospel and only the gospel has the power to transform societies, to confront deception and evil, and to bring hope and truth where there is none.

So, let's jump right into it. We will read starting in verse 4. And we will read to verse 7. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, that is, Paul, Saul, Barnabas, John, Mark, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

[7 : 49] When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. That was the custom. They would first go to these points of connection. They are primarily Jewish missionaries that have come to faith in Jesus.

So, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews, and they had John to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus.

He was with the procouncil, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. You'll notice right off the bat that the missionaries, even though they're commissioned by the church, they are really commissioned and led by the Holy Spirit.

Paul, Barnabas, John, Mark, begin this evangelistic tour across Cyprus. Barnabas, it could have been, it's not in the narrative, but Barnabas is from Cyprus.

It seems in the previous section that the Holy Spirit or the church don't give them a commissioning to a specific region, but they're told to just go, so maybe Barnabas says, let's start with my hometown, my home island.

[9 : 00] So they end up going to Cyprus. They travel, they land, they travel dozens and dozens and dozens of miles proclaiming the gospel, first to the Jewish community and then to the Greeks.

And there seems to be a growing buzz about them for by the time they get so far inland to where the procouncil is, this guy, Sergius Paulus, he needs them in his court.

What is going on? I need to hear what is happening. There clearly is a buzz. The message is being embraced. Things are changing. The gospel has the power to transform societies.

You notice that the procouncil is described as a man of intelligence, which is just to say that he can think in a straight line. He's a rational, logical man. Even though he has a very interesting collection of advisors in his court, he wants truth.

And here's the thing. When change happens, when there's a societal shift, religious or not, people in power seem to take notice. And those who are truth seekers want to know what's happening. [10:13] And this is what's happening with Sergius Paulus. Cyprus, it's implied here that Cyprus, the Cypriots are coming to faith. Everyone, not everyone, it doesn't say that, but enough that there is a buzz happening.

And the procouncil is seeing. He wants to know. He wants to know what is happening with his people. And here's the thing. When the true gospel is proclaimed, it inevitably causes change. The gospel, when it's proclaimed that Jesus Christ is the victor, that he is defeated death by death, that corruption and evil are no longer going to be the main force, within a pagan society, but rather that Jesus is king overall, that righteous and holiness begins to take root in people's lives, behaviors are reformed, money and time are spent in different ways and on different things.

It doesn't happen overnight. Sometimes it can, but by and large, when the gospel is proclaimed, heard, accepted, and it starts to shape people's lives, things transform and things are noticeable. We'll see a great example later on in Acts 19, but there's this instance in Acts 19 where the gospel goes out and it changes the hearts of the people so much that they do away with their idols and it destroys an entire industry of idol making.

[11:44] Big problem for the idol makers. We'll get to that later on. But here's the thing. Like with Israel, like always with God's people, we are, as God's people, called to disciple the nations, teaching them everything that Christ has taught us.

And that means we are to counsel people in the ways of God. What that ends up doing is it exposes false beliefs.

It's false gospels. On one hand, it comforts the afflicted, but those that are in power or are enjoying their comfort, always at the expense of others, what it does is it afflicts them.

So the gospel always has this two-pronged approach to the culture. It comforts those that are afflicted, but also afflicts those that are comfortable. Comfortable in their sin, in their self-glorification, in their idolatry, in their unchecked and selfish use of power.

So the gospel isn't the gospel unless it begins to shake things up and change things. And this is what we're seeing here. The gospel is transforming Cyprus.

[12:58] And people are noticing. And things are changing. And Christ is being embraced as the true King of kings and Lord of lords. This is nothing short of regime change, the regimes of the heart.

But change doesn't come without conflict. I mentioned in Acts 19, I don't know when we're going to get there. I think it might be in a couple months. Maybe before the start of Advent.

But this change doesn't come without conflict. And we're going to see this conflict here with Bar-Jesus or Elymas. Look with me now in verses 8.

And this is our second point, that the gospel confronts deception and evil. Verse 8. But Elymas, the magician, for that is the meaning of his name, opposed them.

That is the missionaries, Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark. Opposed them, seeking to turn the procouncil away from the faith. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him, and said, You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?

[14:16] Make no mistake, he is called out. Saul, Paul does not use flowery language.

There's a time to be to be winsome. There's a time to find bridges and build bridges. I want to be careful with narratives, drawing out prescriptive truths out of them.

This is not necessarily the way you deal with every person that opposes the Lord. But in this case, filled with the Holy Spirit, he is led to call a spade a spade.

This magician, this conjurer, this clairvoyant, this warlock, whatever he is called, he is not on God's side, but on the devil's side.

Bar Jesus, his name literally means the son of salvation. He is influencing the leading highest ranking official of the Roman outpost in Cyprus and not leading him towards righteousness, not leading him towards truth or goodness or mercy or love.

[15:34] Paul calls him out, again, inspired and filled with the Holy Spirit, which is to say he is not acting on his own accord. He doesn't have a grudge against this guy. He is simply a mouthpiece and tool in the Lord's hand.

He says, you're an enemy of righteousness. You are full of deceit and villainy and he is making the straight paths of the Lord crooked.

If this helps at all, he is like worm tongue in the Lord of the Rings, if you're familiar with that, influencing the King Theoden of Rohan, he is speaking sweet deceit in his ears.

He's actively opposing the missionaries from sharing the gospel with Sergius Paulus because he's also making his coin from being an advisor.

He has status in standing in the court of the most powerful man in the land and he stands to lose it. He knows that. He doesn't seem to care that in Christ Jesus the court of a procouncil of Cyprus is nothing compared to the riches of glory of knowing Christ.

[16 : 50] He wants to hold on to his earthly power. He's not letting it go and the apostle Paul gives it to him straight. The gospel message, it will never shy away from addressing deception and evil and confronting it because the good news is that Christ Jesus has come to bring freedom and righteousness and truth and therefore it has to oppose deception, lies, and oppression.

It has to. Oppression in Christ's name is not the gospel or Christianity. Money under the table and corruption, lying, deceit, ends always justifying the means that is not Christianity.

True Christianity will always bring freedom and righteousness and truth. It will always have in mind the glory of God and the flourishing, true flourishing of humanity.

going back to our modern day, Wicca has no real power in comparison to our Lord. It is a false gospel, it has false promises that do not proclaim God as sovereign and creator of all things.

If some of our friends and family, maybe even some of us, maybe we're intrigued by it, there's something alluring and we have an over excited curiosity towards it.

[18 : 26] If we have been or our friends have been exposed to this kind of Wicca belief, just a little dabble of it, a little sprinkle of it, the Bible is very clear that it is irredeemable and it is evil and ungodly.

But also, and we'll see this later on in the third point, that there is great hope for somebody who is engaging with that. It is not the end. But I want to suggest something, maybe a bit of a bigger application and maybe one that might ruffle some feathers.

So I have a broad back when it comes to criticism or pushback, so feel free to talk with me or write me an email. I promise you I won't get offended.

That's like a 100% promise. We might spar a little bit, but I'll just put forward this to you. This is a bigger application for us as it extends into many of our workplaces and is the defining mood of our cultural moment.

And here it is and hear me out. Every level of our government, our bureaucracy, our big corporations that we use, that we buy from, they employ equity officers and inclusion officers and diversity officers.

[19 : 52] And they proclaim a gospel of sorts that on all appearances seems great. Equity is a good thing, like full stop. Inclusion, it's very good.

Excluding people, being prejudiced towards people, it's problematic. Fairness in the workplace, human rights, all great things. However, the vocabulary is used, the English vocabulary is used, but not the English dictionary.

It's ill-defined. Inclusion doesn't mean true inclusion, equity doesn't mean true equity, diversity seems to be at the exclusion of some parts, so it can't be full true inclusivity or diversity.

And what it does is it promotes a contrary worldview that is antithetical to the one true gospel. And like Bar Jesus, Elemis, they influence politicians, their staff, the bureaucracy, executives, our cultural elite, and they promote a vision for the created order that denies that God has created all things and called it good.

And that mankind, when he created mankind, he said, he didn't say good, he said very good. So in effect, God is called a liar and any deviation from such a vision is not met with indifference but scorn.

[21 : 21] I'll give an example. In 2021, the TDSB, the Toronto District School Board, hired a diversity consultant. It's all public and I don't, so it's whatever.

I mean, I know about it, you can look it up. Her name was Kiki Ojo Thompson. And in this meeting, and it was public, like you can find it on YouTube, she was pushing the diversity, equity, inclusion, and a man, a long-time teacher, pushed back.

Not saying you're wrong, this is garbage, to hell with you, just say, hey, listen, can we talk about this? Anyways, a teacher in high standing, decades of experience, also happened to be an openly gay man.

She went after him. And she had it elevated to higher-ups, and in the end, this man pushed back, she went at him hard, there's a lot more details, but for the sake of time, he ended up taking his own life, because of bullying.

There was no discussion, there was no desire for human flourishing, I'm not saying it's her fault that that's what happened, but the direction was never towards the glory of God and the human flourishing and treating somebody with dignity, but rather only observing immutable characteristics, not what's going on in his heart or in his character.

[22 : 55] what I am not suggesting is that every DEI officer that you may know is really a part of a coven, is Wicca, is practicing some kind of witchcraft, I am not saying that at all.

But what I am saying is that the same deception and opposition to all righteousness, making crooked the straight paths of God, the same character that characterizes bar Jesus, this elemus, it's alive and well in anything that actively and obviously opposes the almighty triune God and his gospel of grace and looks to go to war against it.

Friends, I am also not saying don't fight for justice in the workplace. You see a problem, fight for it. But you see the difference there because what you are doing isn't attacking somebody for the way they are immutable, but you are going to war for somebody's dignity and fighting for the truth that is affirmed in God's word, the common grace.

I'll say this as well because I think this is important. I don't want our church and I don't want my ministry to be a culture war ministry or culture war church.

I just don't want it. I think it is a dangerous road to go down. I don't want to be a pawn for right-wing politics. The cultural right has its own idols and false gospels and when the scriptures touch on that, we're going to call it out.

[24 : 37] We're going to call it out. Okay? However, the media and our thought leaders and our entertainment do not push us towards a right-wing type of idolatry and agenda but a progressive one and therefore, I want to call it out.

It is the cultural air we breathe. There is growing parts of the internet that are wildly neo-fascists and they're growing and they're getting very popular but that's not getting pushed by CTV or CBC or 580.

You probably won't see it that much in ads that pop up when you're watching YouTube. Or if you're cheap like our family and get the base subscription of Netflix and whatever.

You're not. It's going to be a progressive push. I'll say this as well. I don't want to be a culture warrior but there certainly is a war that's happening and we need just to be wise about it.

There's a war for the health of our families and our friends and our workplaces. Our children our intellect, our time. Let's do a really interesting conversation by two educators this week.

[25 : 55] They're Christians but they just said hey listen there's a spiritual battle just to read a book these days. Not the Bible, just to read a book. Can you turn the phone off?

Can you turn the noise down just to pick up a book for 20 minutes? It's not easy. There's a war going on. And this goes beyond an internal battle of doing right or wrong or exercising self control. It goes beyond getting your preferred candidate in office. There are real forces that seek to make us less human and that's the key to all of this. To make us less human and to demean our God and to draw us away from love and grace and goodness that is found in Jesus Christ who is the righteous one and who loves our souls.

We would be, I would be foolish to think otherwise. So where is there hope? Because that can seem a bit hopeless. How does the gospel provide hope?

Are we destined to be cultural warriors forever in social media, media battles? I hope not. I pray not. So what happens next? How does the gospel of Christ confront such deception and evil and therefore bring us hope?

[27 : 11] Let's read on, verses 9 to 12. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?

And now behold the hand of the Lord, that is to say God's judgment, the hand of the Lord is upon you and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time immediately.

Mist and darkness fell upon him and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. Verse 12, Then the procouncil, that is Sergius Paulus, believed, and he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

There's no standoff like in the movies. There's no epic battle at the end of the trilogy. But like Jesus, the spirit-filled apostle Paul just pronounces the Lord's judgment and it is so.

If you remember Jesus, he's on the boat with the disciples. The wind and the waves are crashing down. He is sleeping. They cry out to him. And what does he say?

[28 : 21] He says, be still. He just speaks. And it is so. It is a judgment. We talked about this way back when we were in Mark. Wind and the waves and the storm represents the evil forces at work.

And he just pronounces his judgment. Be still. There's no battle. They have to submit to him. And this is what we are seeing here. That there's a submission not to Paul but by the Holy Spirit that fills him up.

And this man is struck blind. What we are seeing is the outer working of an inner reality. Because Bar Jesus is spiritually blind and he is leading people into all sorts of spiritual blindness.

And now the judgment of God is on him so that physically he is like he is spiritually. He tries to deceive people and now he is struggling to find a hand to lead him here and there.

I'll say this. And this is where the hope is. There will always be a judgment upon those who act in God's name or proclaim a competing gospel and vision for human flourishing that is against what the scriptures say.

[29 : 36] They might persist for a time but they will not persist forever. God will not stand by when people make his straight paths crooked.

It won't happen. He won't allow it. God will not be mocked nor allow evil to persist indefinitely. And this is where our hope is.

What's interesting here is that the physical blinding of Bar Jesus leads to the spiritual awakening of Sergius Paulus. In our story, Sergius Paulus comes to faith not simply because of the supernatural event but we see in verse 12.

What does it say? The procouncil believed when he saw what had occurred. But here it is. What the Holy Spirit does is he always proclaims the message and then confirms it not necessarily in supernatural ways but by his spirit making alive our souls to hear and to see so to speak spiritually the truth of the gospel.

And this is what we are seeing with Sergius Paulus. So what about the magician though? What about our friends that are deep? in another form of spirituality that really is demonic at its core or a way of thinking and a worldview that does not elevate Christ as king but seeks to actually dethrone him and doesn't see dignity in the person but actually sees the person as less than human?

[31 : 07] Where's their hope? We're not told what happens to Bar Jesus. The narrative leaves him as blind. It's really sad.

But, but, it's interesting that the apostle Paul who was himself acting as a hand of the devil trying to destroy the church, he meets the risen savior.

And what happens? He is struck blind. The judgment of the Lord comes upon him and he comes to faith. Notice here, verse 11.

I'm sorry, yeah, verse 11. The second part of it. I'll read the whole thing. And now behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you. This is Paul talking to Bar Jesus. And you will be blind, not forever and unable to see.

Not forever, but for a time. Maybe this is, maybe this is a tipping of, of Luke's tipping of the cap to, to, to what actually happened with Bar Jesus. Maybe, like Paul, he came to faith.

[32 : 08] He, he did away with his attacks against the church and decided instead to humble himself before the king. Could God not have turned this false prophet who claimed to be the son of salvation, could he not have turned him to put his faith in the son who is salvation?

Could he not have? Is this too big for God? I would say no. And I can't say, guys, this is what happened because it's not in the narrative.

But I want to say I really, really, really, really hope it can happen. I believe it can happen. That it, that it happened. And that it can happen today. And this, friends, is why we proclaim the gospel in obedience to the Great Commission.

And this is where I'll wrap things up. What we are seeing in Acts 13 is the fulfillment of Acts chapter 1, 8 and the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel account.

That people called by God, faith in Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, are just bearing witness to who Jesus is and things are transforming.

[33 : 19] And churches that think the Great Commission and Acts chapter 1, verse 8 are optional are churches that are on, on the way down a terrible spiral. And we might be a church, God forbid, that, that finds ourselves in a time where we think this is optional.

And we might have the best catechism, which, by the way, we had a fantastic catechism this morning. Next week we're on, 930, if you want to come. We've got the best catechism, small groups, best everything.

And we think that the Great Commission and Acts chapter 1, verse 8 is optional. Friends, we are cut off at the root. We are failing to obey Christ. Let us then proclaim hope and truth in the gospel. So, to wrap things up, are we to fear evil? No. Because we serve the almighty, eternal maker of heaven and earth, who does not battle our enemies as they appear to us, but has already defeated them on the cross of Calvary.

Cutting down the power of death, hell can rage all it wants against you. Your eternity is secure. Your joy in Christ is complete. And there is hope and health and restoration for our friends and our family and our loved ones and our neighbors and our co-workers and ourselves when we falter or look to oppose the sun or look to make crooked the straight paths of God.

[34 : 55] So, friends, let us walk in this truth and proclaim that the Lord is Christ. He has brought us salvation and our hearts and our souls, they long after him.

Amen. Let us pray. Father, we pray that whatever we do, your name will be lifted high.

And when we inevitably get in the way, because even though we are saved, we are not yet made perfect. We are growing in holiness, not yet made perfectly holy.

When we get in the way, Lord, that you would be gracious to us and very obviously but gently just guide us away from our folly back to you.

And Lord, as we are your people out in the world, help us to, by your Holy Spirit, have bravery and to stand for truth, to stand for your glory, to elevate the people around us to the dignity that you have bestowed upon them.

[36 : 06] Lord, that we would be people that stand for true justice, that we stand for true inclusion. Lord, thank you so much that your church from the very beginning wasn't a monolith of an ethnicity but included people from all sorts of different backgrounds and ethnicities.

And Lord, help us to be about that. Lord, help us also to be people of prayer, to not try to do your work apart from you.

Lord, that you would fill us afresh every day with your Holy Spirit as we turn our faces and seek yours. We pray all this in Christ's name. Amen.